

Weber: Overture Oberon

Overture to the opera first performed 12th April 1826 at Covent Garden to an English libretto by James Robinson Planché after Wieland.

It could as well have been called *Indiana Jones and the Caliph's Daughter*. In order to salvage relations with his wife, Titania, the king of the fairies Oberon needs Charlemagne's knight, Sir Huon of Bordeaux, to penetrate the heart of the Muslim empire and succeed in his bid to elope with Reiza, closely guarded daughter of Haroun el Raschid. So he gives him a horn with which he can summon magical aid to get out of the many scrapes in his adventure.

Unlike Italy, audiences in Germany or England would be most likely to hear new opera music first in the concert hall. So the overture functions like a trailer for the opera, being compiled from the music of highlight moments. It begins in fairyland with the magic horn. The speed picks up with a triumphal march from the end of the opera. (Yes, of course he wins in the end.) The broad theme given quietly on the clarinet is part of Sir Huon's Act I *scena* in which he shows his truly knightly character.

The overture ends with the joyous flying gesture of a theme from the end of Reiza's dramatic Act II aria *Ocean, Thou Mighty Monster*. Shipwrecked with Huon on a rocky shore, she has been singing of both the menacing calm and the terrible fury of the sea, when in the distance she sees a sail. Hence the excitement. If she expected to be rescued, however, she is in for a shock. The ship belongs to Barbary pirates, who take her prisoner to sell in Tunis while Sir Huon is left senseless on the shore, and there's lots more hokum to come before they get home.

Mozart: Piano Concerto no.24 in C minor K491 (Martin Leigh, piano)

First performed 24th March 1786 in Vienna (W. A. Mozart, piano)

Allegro

Rondo (Larghetto)

Variations (Allegretto)

The set of Mozart's piano concertos is among the great ornaments of civilisation. Opera is never far away in Mozart, and in this concerto drama is to the fore, though balanced with classical poise. One of a group written in the build-up to *Marriage of Figaro* (f. p. 1786), it is possibly the stormy anger of the sea-god Neptune in *Idomeneo* (1781) which gives the key to the drama rather than the infernal furies of *Don Giovanni* (1787).

As usual in these 'golden period' concerti, the woodwind writing is peerless, exactly placed for maximum effect, as the first movement amply illustrates. It well illustrates another point too. Is the music fast and furious or is it broad and relaxed? It is both, not just alternating but at the same time. Only Mozart could ever maintain this combination of metres, so that neither the fast nor the slow sense is ever quite absent, through such stretches.

Mozart was not usually adventurous about musical form, but this piece is an exception. Each movement illustrates a different way to build by creating variety out of the single principal theme stated at its opening. The first movement has no true second subject, elements of the opening tune being extracted to supply the basis for all sections. The

slow movement is a rondo in which the gentle opening music links a series of contrasting episodes. The finale, with its ambiguous happy-sad atmosphere, is a set of variations, the central ones quite free, on a theme with a particularly quirky twist in it. Famously, this greatly impressed Beethoven, who counted K491 in his own pianistic repertoire.

Dvorak: Symphony no.9 in E minor op.95 "From The New World"

First performed 16th December 1893 in New York.

Adagio - Allegro molto

Adagio

Scherzo (Molto Vivace)

Allegro con fuoco

Immigrant communities typically try to recreate The Old Country in their new land, and end up with a sort of caricature culture embodying a travesty of a lost world. 19th century German and Bohemian immigration to North America laid the basis of a culture of orchestral music and, thanks to wealthy patronage, a National Conservatory of Music was created, just like those created in Europe a few decades earlier.

Using her husband's money, Mrs Jeanette Thurber invited Dvorak to head the college. Famous and well travelled, but far from rich, the advantages of income finally prevailed over the wrench of leaving his wife and family for long periods, since time and cost meant that visits would be very few. He lived mainly with Czech families in New York, taking breaks with others up-country in Pennsylvania and Iowa.

To the resident Americans perhaps his presence authenticated their Little Europe, but for him it was the difference and not the similarity which was interesting. Accustomed as he was to sensing the relationship of landscape to culture, he saw more clearly than his hosts how differently the Bohemian grew in this American soil.

Is this interpretation a mere speculation? Not entirely. Look again at that title, and notice the word 'From'. It was Dvorak's Czech Nationalist predecessor Smetana who had begun titles with the word 'From', such as *From My Life*, *From The Homeland*, and *From Bohemia's Woods and Fields* with the implication of a picture postcard not from some foreign land but from home territory, to see anew what is before your very eyes. As an outsider privileged with the leisure to observe, Dvorak was watching a string of ex-pat enclaves turn, for better or worse, into a new culture - not just, as they may have thought, a new homeland, but a whole new world.

The symphony was begun just one term into his teaching appointment, and completed by May. He had had time to see how different were both the city and the countryside, though perhaps not long enough to quite get used to it, and also to begin an acquaintance with the nascent musicology of both the Black and the Red Indian heritages through the Conservatory. So, what did this observant distinguished visitor see?

In the first movement the comfortably familiar is punctured by the aggressively alien. As the movement hits its stride it seems to speak of the pace of life - the frantic, very un-European rush of the city but also the eerie stillness of the land. In the Largo, forget TV images of Yorkshire villages. The famous cor anglais solo speaks of a landscape which is immovably broad (look, no modulation!) encased (the brass chorale) in awesome terrain, and troubled only by the rustling wind. The Scherzo, with its debts to both

Beethoven's Ninth and a native Indian dance, seems to discover a new aesthetic, where the vigour of the primitive meets the delight of the naively unaffected. The Finale seems to deliver a positive judgment on the future that could develop from this beginning.
(Insert witty and aposite comments here.)

From The New World is far from being the first serious music to be born in America, but still its impact on what Americans and others consider 'American' was and continues to be huge. You may find here pre-echoes of everything from Broadway to Copland, as if this is where that 'American' sound was learnt. But there need be no surprise at the symphony's innate Czechness, as it is all seen through European Bohemian eyes.